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## THE EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF COMMERCIAL COURSES IN HIGH SCHOOLS<sup>1</sup>

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The topic on which you have asked me to speak takes for granted the practical worth of commercial studies, and it also concedes by implication a demand of our communities for this form of education. The question I am to discuss is: What as school men shall be our attitude toward commercial education in high schools? Shall we pity the students in commercial courses, and silently wish a thing recently expressed to me by an unsympathetic teacher in a commercial course: "I wish that in some way I might take hold of these students and just lift them over into some other department of the school"? As teachers and principals, are we to deal with the different departments of our schools after the manner of a principal of one of the largest high schools of the Middle West, who said a few years ago that he had no students in his commercial course who could be persuaded to go elsewhere? In considering the question of values of a high-school education, we may also take another fact for granted, namely, that to get an educational result from high-school studies, we must first get the students into the high school, so that our consideration of a high-school education may well begin after the manner of the familiar recipe for hare pie.

I shall in this paper maintain the thesis that, for a large proportion of those in attendance on secondary schools, an educational result is possible from commercial studies equal with, or superior to, results which can be obtained by any other grouping of studies in these schools. In considering this statement it should be borne in mind that there are certain subjects which may be termed fundamental in all secondary education. As such I should include elementary algebra, and practical and cultural work in English. It is possible

<sup>1</sup>Address delivered before the Massachusetts State Teachers Association, October 27, 1905.

that plane geometry and certain courses in history might also well be added as universal subjects. The algebra should be included because of the power it gives in generalization, and the geometry might be included as discipline of the reasoning faculties. The English would be accepted without question, and I feel that a case can be made for the cultural and practical worth of history.<sup>1</sup> It is my belief that with the subjects here mentioned, and what are familiarly termed commercial branches, it is possible to secure a disciplinary education of the best sort, and furnish an equipment for life at the same time.

It would be futile to attempt an avoidance of the issue in dealing with this topic; I accept the issue, expressed as follows by a prominent school official in Massachusetts: "All courses designed primarily to meet vocational ends are likely to be narrow and superficial; they are singularly dangerous, because their superficiality is so skilfully concealed." Such a statement makes a sharp line of division between vocational education and higher education; but, pray, may not vocational education be the highest and truest education? The highest education is that which fits its recipient for the highest service, to become the most useful member of the community, and the commercial courses in high schools answer, I believe, admirably to these requirements. President Pritchett has set the high ideal that education is to do four things: to reach lofty moral purpose; to give a sympathetic and intelligent understanding of men; to lead to clear thinking; and to give a capacity for thorough work. No education can be considered high, or even adequate, which does not accomplish these ends, and it is my firm conviction that commercial education, to its constituency and in its place, admirably meets these requirements.

The curse of our present education is the belief that a given amount of knowledge of a peculiar sort makes one learned. We have largely disregarded an older and more correct notion that education is power, and were Abraham Lincoln, for example, to appear now, as in his own time, he would be branded as an ignoramus; Shakespeare could scarcely claim respectability at the hands of some college-entrance committees and boards. Please contrast with our

<sup>1</sup>Herrick, "History in a Commercial High School," *N. E. A. Proceedings*, 1903.

standards Greek education, which produced men of the highest intellectual power—men, some students believe, intellectually as superior to the European or American of the present as the European and American are superior to the African negro.<sup>1</sup> Yet Greek education was of marvelous simplicity. The Greeks did not study a foreign language; they had almost nothing of what is termed science, and were limited to reasoning on a few fundamental phenomena of their own life. We have in the present too much of the quantitative theory of education, and our schools spend their time in dispensing knowledge that is of no use, which becomes to the one who gets it mere lumber. Is it strange, I ask, when students are stuffed with a certain amount of this and of that, with no other end except to be stuffed, that knowledge should soon go through their minds as water goes through a sieve or air through a screen? No doubt we have seen Professor Baker's impeachment of our present education in a recent article on the helplessness of the modern undergraduate.<sup>2</sup> In this connection, let me say that one can be but touched with the lament of Helen Keller, that after she had begun to be educated by our present methods she no longer had time to think.

In a discussion of this topic we get to the heart of the formal theory of education; to illustrate my meaning I may take the case of an Eton schoolboy who wrote on the door of a Greek classroom "The Road to Nowhere." When the teacher came, he let this motto stand, and added, "Nevertheless a Good Road to Travel for Exercise;" but it is my contention that a road to be traveled for exercise need not be a road to nowhere; and that discipline, in the best sense of the word, is possible from the use of subject-matter which, after its use in school, may serve some practical ends. A pioneer in the wool industry at Bradford, England, was ordered by his physician to take vigorous exercise with dumb-bells. After considering the matter, he asked to be permitted to substitute manual labor in his factory, and for a part of each day he went into the factory and packed and lifted boxes as a common laborer, and thus accomplished the end which the physician sought to reach by formal exercise. My educational doctrine is much like that of this practical man who did not believe in

<sup>1</sup>Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius*, p. 342.

<sup>2</sup>*Educational Review*, September, 1905.

doing work which did not bring something in. In his book, *The Voice of the Scholar*, President Jordan has an answer to the question: What knowledge is of most worth? It is clear, he says, that the most valuable knowledge is that which can be wrought directly in the fabric of our lives, and that discipline is most valuable which will best serve us in our own individualities.<sup>1</sup>

It seems to me that the formal-training adherents made two errors: (1) they denied that good discipline could be secured from practical subjects; and (2) they held that purely disciplinary subjects developed the necessary powers which could be applied to all situations of life. Results already shown are the best answers to these contentions. Discipline, broad intelligence in the best sense of the word, has been secured from practical studies in agriculture, engineering and technology, manual training, and more recently in commerce. Facts or principles that have utility are not thereby invalidated from serving as furnishings in a mental gymnasium. While interest is increased from the practical aspects of data, this in no sense prevents such material from serving the ends of training. An alumnus of Brown, now professor in the University of California, in a recent public address indicates a change toward this whole matter of practical education; he tells us with what disdain he and his fellow-students of the classics looked on those "less gifted, less fortunate, or misguided" individuals who did not study Greek, philosophy, and the like. But in fifteen years the practical studies have so well demonstrated their worth that this man is led to say: "Such courses have not only established their utility, but they have won a general recognition for dignity, and the fortunate possessor of such training is regarded as quite as distinguished as he whose head is full of Greek or the more difficult Sanskrit."<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, the development of particular powers by formal-training methods is no guarantee that such powers will be brought to bear in practical situations. Fine scholars, in the formal-training sense of the word, are often lamentable failures in meeting the demands of life. This has been a source of wonder, and it is to be explained by the fact that mind may be trained only to particu-

<sup>1</sup> P. 71.

<sup>2</sup> Carl C. Plehn, *Education for Commerce as a Profession*, p. 149.

lar ends. To make sure of the use of powers, the training of them should be as nearly as possible in the fields of effort where they are to be applied. A football team or an eight-oared crew is not taken to the gymnasium, or is kept there but for a short time. Players develop skill and confidence and have increased zest by engaging in the game at which they are to be tested. Embryo lawyers practice in a moot court. Contest debaters meet friendly teams in mock debates, and all these preliminary bouts are very real, presenting just so far as possible the situations which will be furnished in the final contests. Preparation for business should not be made an exception to the general rule. Power and the confidence to deal with commercial affairs will be furnished in the largest measure by using the material of commercial life as the subject-matter of instruction.

The kind of commercial education for which the plea is here made is both liberal and liberalizing. Too often the man of commerce has been the slave of his work; let him have a preliminary education that will enable him to become its master, to rise above the petty details and annoyances, and, while not ignoring these, reduce them to a system and see their broad meaning. This more liberal education may well be guided by a truth pointed out by President Hadley with regard to professional schools. Such schools have their largest usefulness, not in furnishing a multitude of details, but rather in equipping their students with general principles. Thus the future practitioners get the general principles which otherwise they would never get, and possessing these they learn the details of their work very quickly in actual practice. Commercial instruction is not to make full-fledged men of business; it will do its best work by giving an attitude of mind which leads to an intelligent and sympathetic interest in business. If commercial education does no more than to give men the power and the inclination for studious and devoted apprenticeships, it will render a high educational service and is well worth a place in our systems of instruction.

Secondary education is, I believe, at fault in teaching particular subjects and in teaching them in particular ways because they were taught, or were so taught, to earlier generations. Thus education becomes archaic, with the marked differences between the things

taught in school and the practice of the world for which the school is supposed to prepare. And thus the school and its discipline are looked upon as things apart from actual life. I saw recently the confession of a teacher who was determined that a child should learn to spell "gone." The child, as I remember, was required to write the word a hundred times as an exercise; but the exercise was one thing and the correct spelling of the word another, for at the conclusion of the exercise the child left a note on the teacher's desk saying, "I have gorn home." Now, it is the problem of the secondary school, along with other departments of instruction, to give a true education. A true education is an education which can be put to use which is after all a practical education.

In dealing with the actual content of a proposed high-school commercial course, I can find no better rule than to say that the aims should be social, both in subjects selected and in the study of these. I have already instanced certain subjects of broad general worth; to these should be added other studies that have to do with the science of society, such as history, economics, civics, and finally those subjects that furnish some knowledge of the technique of business operations. It has for some years been my contention that commercial education will get the best results by retaining many of the old subjects of study, giving to them new interpretation and application. Thus I would have in the curriculum of a commercial high school applied science, applied mathematics, applied geography, a new interpretation of history, special applications of English and foreign languages, and a new form of economics. Someone immediately says: "You have given too many subjects for the best educational results." But the matter to be settled is not so much subjects of study as it is material to be selected from these, and methods of study. A conscious aim running through the entire commercial high-school course will give unity and directness to what might otherwise be isolated and disjointed. Much of our high-school education lacks definiteness of purpose. Pupils are drifting, or they are doing things with no other end than to be doing them. Now, I submit that results from such a procedure are not fairly the basis of comparison with results from a course where subjects are co-ordinated with some fundamental idea as a unit. It is fair to state that the

commercial course for which I am pleading is complete, logical, cohesive, and balanced.

I am so firm a believer in the educational value of the course just described that I feel that such a course offers the best education in every sense of the word; best in the development of real intellectual power, best in the equipment it gives the individual to look out for himself. The education I am considering is not technical, it is liberal; it is not selfish, it is broadly humanitarian. For some years I have had to do with a school giving an education of this sort, and I have watched results with close attention and keen interest. I am frank to say that the effect upon the teaching force, upon the students, and upon the community is such as to make me an enthusiast.

First, as to the effect upon the teachers. The School of Commerce was put into the Central High School at Philadelphia in 1898, much against the judgment of the president of the school and the teachers. I was placed in charge of this project and began my task single-handed. It was uphill work for a year or so. Some teachers accepted assignments in my department under protest, while others refused outright to teach what they felt would be an inferior class of students. Solicitation and persuasion early overcame the objections of some, and others were converted by the earnestness and determination of our young men. We have now established an educational *esprit de corps* in which the teachers to a man take pride. Comparisons of the different departments are not to our discredit; teachers who have to do with students of all departments have repeatedly put themselves out of the way to commend the effort and the accomplishment of the School of Commerce boys. For the past two or three years our section of the senior class has been openly and repeatedly termed the most gentlemanly and best-intentioned. Late in the last school year a teacher of ten years' experience in our school voluntarily came with the statement that a commercial third-year class was the best third-year section he had ever taught from any department. Recently a new instructor of languages gave me the assurance that he found the classes of the department of commerce as oases in the desert. Said he: "Your boys show a real interest and try to learn." The statement just quoted is true of our work as



a whole. Our students are interested, they come for a definite purpose; we give them work which is related to that purpose, and they respond.

Evidence can be furnished in abundance to show that I am not misjudging results. Our boys have gone into practical affairs and given the best of accounts of themselves. Only the other day the controller of a big concern in which five of our former students are employed called one of the five, and said: "These high-school men we have in the office are giving fine service, and I have made up my mind that I want more of this kind of help. Now, won't you get me the names of eight or ten other men trained in the same department as you were, so that I may correspond with them with a view to taking them on." This is but an instance of a large number of cases that have come to my attention. I believe that we could place to good advantage ten times as many boys as we have thus far been able to train.

But I can furnish what a company of teachers will likely regard as more convincing evidence still of the educational value of a commercial high-school course. We began with the sole thought of giving a finished education to boys who were to leave the high school and go to work, but in the four classes we have thus far graduated there have been an increasing number of those who wished to continue their studies in engineering, in commerce, in general college work, or in the professional schools. By some slight modification of the program in the fourth year students are prepared to pass entrance examinations, or they study during the summer and meet the entrance requirements, or some of them have gone into college on conditions which they easily made up. Though we are primarily a finishing school, we have had no difficulty in getting students into college, and they have made good records after getting there. In June, 1904, we sent a boy, by no means exceptional, to an examination for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and he passed in advanced French, advanced German, and all the other subjects of the requirement without condition. This same fellow easily made good his standing in the critical first year at the institute.

In our first class was an ambitious son of plain German people. His standing was such that I was able to get for him a free city

scholarship at the University of Pennsylvania. He was admitted on our certificates in all subjects except French, he having studied Spanish at the high school. Unaided, this boy worked up two years of French in a single summer, and passed the entrance examination with a good margin. More than this, he went into French work at college on that preparation and made the grade "distinguished." This student entered at the Wharton School, where certain work was a duplication of what he had taken in the high school, and with credits for this and by examinations he gained sophomore standing. Here he came into competition with a goodly number of men prepared in fitting schools of all kinds, and who had also been one year in the university; but, improbable as it may sound, this boy headed his class and was awarded the Terry prize for the best standing of any second-year man in the Wharton School. He also won the first prize in an important essay competition. By credits, examinations, and special work that boy in two years completed the sixty units required for graduation at the University of Pennsylvania, and I may say that he did this not by electing snap courses. He was given a graduate scholarship with an income, and began last year an important piece of investigation, which investigation has been continued during the last summer in London, and the young man is now studying at the University of Berlin. I may remark that in all probability this young man never would have come to the high school but for the School of Commerce work.

I can cite another case, I believe more remarkable still, showing what a commercial course can do toward producing an educational result. We graduated last June a fellow who took our heavy fourth year with the highest possible mark in every subject. He was judged by those who taught all the fourth-year students of the school to be "conspicuously the ablest man in the class," and by some he was said to be the most satisfactory student they had ever taught. We were able to get for this boy the highest honor that comes to a Philadelphia schoolboy, a Simon Muir scholarship, with an income of \$400 a year for four years, good in any American college. This fellow has shown a phenomenal capacity for language study. He has read a list of German and French books nearly a yard long, and has had no difficulty in taking junior standing in German. But, more than

this, the same boy has studied Latin as a diversion. In addition to the necessary preliminary mastering of the grammar, he read alone while in the high school the seven books of Caesar's *Gallic War* and all of Caesar's *Civil Wars*. He put himself to the test in a regular examination on four books of the *Gallic War*, and passed with an "excellent." This boy had the discipline from a study of modern languages by which he made up the four years of preparatory Latin, and is now reading Livy in college. He has also gone into the study of Greek with the keenest interest. It should be added that this student was awarded the Eugene Delano prize for the best entrance examination in French and German.

There is another aspect of going to college that especially appeals to me. Our students are urged to find some useful employment and look out for themselves. Many of them get outside work while they are attending school and during the summer recess. We have quite an industry in supplying clerks and stenographers to summer hotels at the seashore and in the mountains. These outside activities have an important effect on the students. I have almost come to believe that any boy from our school who is made of the right sort of stuff can go to college and see himself through. I have in mind a young fellow who started in two years ago with barely money enough to pay his first-term bills. He has paid his own way, has had the best of a good time, has served on the college dramatic organization, won a place on an intercollegiate debating team in open competition, and has been a leader in many student enterprises. Now this fellow comes up to the beginning of the third year with \$300 in the bank, and he has, moreover, because of his record, just been awarded a faculty scholarship giving him free tuition. Although he is barely twenty-one years of age, this fellow has been offered the treasurership of a reputable concern for which he has been working, and at a salary of one hundred and fifty dollars a month; but he has had the wisdom to go back to college. We may approve of an education which enables young men to develop themselves in this way, not only because it is good, but also because it is good for something.

Of course, I have given the records of our best students, but what a few have done superlatively well many others have done creditably. We started in with no thought of preparation for further study, and

this preparatory work is still incidental. Our aim is to give an education, to make our young men into gentlemen who are not afraid of work and who have habits of correct thought. Out of a class of thirty-seven graduating in June last, two have entered the city School of Pedagogy to become teachers in the grammar schools, two have entered on a college course preparatory to a study of divinity, two are in engineering schools, one is in a general college course, four are continuing special studies in commerce at the Wharton School of Finance and Economy, one is in a medical college, one is a physician's stenographer and is studying medicine in the office, and one has made the same arrangements in a lawyer's office for the study of law. This does not include a number of the thirty-seven who are already entered in various night schools for a study of languages, chemistry, textile work, architectural drawing, designing, etc.

It is gratifying to feel that when young men are equipped to meet the demands of the outside world they can also satisfy the requirements of the higher institutions of learning. If they could not, it would be a sad comment on the demands of these institutions. There is still a change that I should like to see brought about in the relations of colleges and secondary schools. It is in the acceptance of vocational subjects for college admission. Those who have the inclination to go to college and the capacity to profit by attendance at college should have the way made easy for their going. I would have as many roads as possible between the secondary school and college, but only with this condition that they be the roads of a true education. And I believe that as much mental power can be secured from a study of the narrowly vocational subjects, and the vocational study of other subjects, as can be had in any other way. Largeness of view may be had through the consideration of narrow interests over wide periods of time, or of wide interests over a narrower period. The kind of education here meant is limited as to reach of time, but world-wide in its interest.

My plea is not alone for the establishment of commercial schools and courses, but also for breadth of view in them where established. We should raise our voices against any notion of education along the lines of least resistance. The commercial course meant by this paper is not to be merely a duplication of the technical commercial school.

The worst evils of the elective system have worked to the injury of commercial education. Students in some public high school are permitted virtually to follow the work of the business colleges, by taking commercial studies at any time and in any order. Students from other schools have come to us, all out of gear educationally through having been allowed to study shorthand or bookkeeping the first year in the high school instead of algebra. Commercial courses in high schools should not be limited to furnishing facility in one or more of the branches of business. As was pointed out by Plato, mere technical skill or cleverness is not worthy to be called education.

The value of a school or course should not be in its students having any brand of knowledge, or passing any set of examinations; rather should it be in the temper of mind created, the attitude given toward life and the future of those educated after they go out from school. Just now our communities are passing through a grave moral crisis, and it is incumbent upon our schools to give familiarity with every branch of work in the society of which they are a part, and so to quicken the moral sense of those educated that the too obvious indifference of the present will cease. Commercial education is an education for social needs. Let us who have to do with commercial education stand for those broad principles of justice and humanity which shall have regard for the duties and obligations of men to men. This can be insisted upon both in the selection of subjects for study and in the methods of studying them. We shall never get the correct notion of commercial education until we see in commerce the exchange of services, until we see in goods, not money, but blessings. In last analysis the educational worth of commercial schools is found in the fact that they can train for the largest and best social service, and in doing this it is my firm conviction that they furnish the broadest, the most liberal, and the most useful education.